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Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies by Jared Diamond

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Review Essay

How the West Won

History That Feels Good Usually Isn't

David Frum

Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies. BY JARED DIAMOND. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, 480 pp. \$27.50.

Virgil claimed that it was Rome's task to show mercy to the conquered and overthrow the proud. Two thousand years later, America's professors have assigned themselves the old Virgilian project. Book after book is published in a vast effort to convince Americans to think more highly of foreign peoples and cultures—especially those once deemed primitive—and less highly of themselves.

This is sometimes called the “therapeutic” approach to history, but it might be more accurate to call it the anti-imperialistic approach. The imperialist writers of a century ago sought to show how once small, backward peoples—the English, the Americans, the Prussians—built states and then, through their own superior

personal qualities, rose to dominate a continent or the globe. The new anti-imperialist writers want to tell exactly the opposite story. The rise of the West, as they tell it, reflects no honor or glory on Western civilization. If it happened at all—and some anti-imperial writers deny it—it only proves the West's superior ruthlessness and cruelty. Or else, as other anti-imperial writers say, the rise of the West was the result of happenstance: the good luck of having plenty of iron and coal conveniently close, a temperate climate, easy access to the sea. Much of the anti-imperial school's writing can immediately be recognized as exercises in excuse-making. But as the screenwriters of Hollywood occasionally remind us, even very bad genres can sometimes produce good works.

A good example of a bad genre is perhaps the best way to describe Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

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Diamond is an evolutionary biologist by training, but over the past quarter-century he became interested in what he calls “Yali’s question.” Yali was a local politician Diamond got to know while doing fieldwork in New Guinea. Diamond describes him as inquisitive and charismatic but tinged with resentment. As Diamond remembers it, Yali’s question was posed like this: “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?” The world has been grappling with this question for the past 400 years. Diamond is one of the very few authors to produce an answer that is both original and convincing.

Diamond’s intentions are, as he frankly confesses, apologetic. He believes that most Westerners inwardly explain their success in racial terms, and he aims to show that white Americans, Europeans, and Australians owe their prosperity and power much more to chance than to their own merits. Despite his polemical intent, he has produced one of the most fascinating works of history in recent times.

TRAPPED IN A BUBBLE

Diamond believes that the peoples of Eurasia got a head start over the rest of the world 13,000 years ago and that they owed that lead to the accident of the distribution of wild grains. Diamond convincingly contends that the ancient Fertile Crescent—the arc of arable land that spreads from Palestine across southern Anatolia and down through Mesopotamia—was uniquely abundant in potential food crops. Wheat was indigenous to the Fertile Crescent. So were lentils and chickpeas. No other place on earth was equally

blessed. America might have had maize and apples, but what convinced early humans to switch from hunting to farming was not the availability of any one food but a sufficient number of them to offer a balanced and secure diet, which America, Africa, and Australia each lacked. Early agriculture competed with hunting as a way of life, and only in places where the plants existed to prove agriculture clearly superior could it take off. The Fertile Crescent met that requirement better than any other place, and so it was there that agriculture began.

Ditto for the domestication of animals. Eurasia boasted more usable species of animals than any other region. By Diamond’s calculation, of the world’s 148 big wild land herbivores, only 14 are suitable for domestication and only five can thrive across a broad range of climates: sheep, goats, cows, pigs, and horses. Of the five major and the nine minor domesticatable animals, 13 are indigenous to Eurasia, one (the llama) is indigenous to South America, and none are indigenous to North America, Australasia, or sub-saharan Africa. Africa has animals that can be tamed, like the elephant, but none that has ever been domesticated.

Eurasia’s agricultural head start led to its head start in every other way. The first societies to become agricultural were the first to develop complex social structures, specialized armies, and eventually the guns and steel of Diamond’s title.

As for the third element of that title, germs, that too was an advantage traceable to Eurasia’s agricultural head start. Most infectious diseases originated from human interaction with animals. Because Eurasians developed animal husbandry earlier than anyone else, and with a wider

variety of animals, they developed stronger immune systems than either native North Americans or native Australians.

The Fertile Crescent's agricultural and epidemiological breakthroughs spread throughout Eurasia because of another lucky break: unlike America and Africa, which extend northwards and southwards, Eurasia extends eastwards and westwards. For primitive humans, this was an important difference: crops and herds move more easily between regions of similar climate than they do from warmer to colder regions. It took thousands of years to create species of maize that could grow in the northeastern United States. The wheat of southern Turkey, by contrast, could quickly and easily spread to southern Europe, north Africa, northern India, and eventually northern China. Likewise, humans move more easily westward and eastward, where they encounter similar kinds of germs. Diamond writes, "The cool highlands of Mexico would have provided ideal conditions for raising llamas, guinea pigs and potatoes, all domesticated in the cool highlands of the Andes. Yet the northward spread of these Andean specialities was stopped completely by the hot intervening lowlands of Central America. Five thousand years after llamas had been domesticated in the Andes, the Olmecs, Maya, Aztecs, and all other native societies of Mexico remained without pack animals and without any edible domestic mammals except dogs."

What was true for agricultural technology was true for technology of other kinds. Diamond observes that all early Old World wheels were made in the same odd way—by joining three planks together around an axle—which suggests that the idea was diffused. The same seems to

have been true for writing. But while writing quickly spread throughout Eurasia, it was unable to make the much shorter hop from Mexico, which had a writing system, to the Andes or the mouth of the Mississippi, where sophisticated agricultural societies could have made use of it. As Diamond tells it, non-European societies were trapped in ecological bubbles by their geography and in intellectual bubbles by their illiteracy. Describing the ambush and capture of the Inca emperor Atahulpa by Francisco Pizarro's Spaniards at the Peruvian highland town of Cajamarca in November 1532, Diamond wonders why the Indians were so easily tricked. His answer: illiteracy made them gullible. "From books, the Spaniards knew of many contemporary civilizations remote from Europe, and about several thousand years of European history. Pizarro explicitly modeled his ambush of Atahulpa on the successful strategy of Cortes. In short, literacy made the Spaniards heirs to a huge body of knowledge about human behavior and history. By contrast, not only did Atahulpa have no conception of the Spaniards themselves, and no personal experience of any other invaders from overseas, but he also had not even heard (or read) of similar threats to anyone else, anywhere else, anytime previously in history."

SCHOLARSHIP AS SOCIAL WORK

This summary cannot do justice to the precision and scientific learning of Diamond's account. Like William McNeill's *Plagues and Peoples*, this book's melding of disciplines, in this case botany and zoology with history, alters the way one thinks. It is not to be missed by anyone interested in the ancient problem of why some nations are rich and others poor. It is a

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much better book than David Landes' overpraised *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*—a series of brilliant individual insights linked by a badly out-of-date belief in investment-driven growth and command economies. And its conclusions are even more provocative than Thomas Sowell's *Conquest and Cultures*, although Sowell's teaching that war, conquest, and enslavement are the historical norm—a norm that has often made future progress possible—is a useful antidote to *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

And yet, as fascinating as this book is, it is also in important ways destructive. It is untrue to claim, as Diamond does, that the traditional account of the rise of the West was an implicitly racist one. At least in this century, the traditional account of the rise of the West has given credit to its propitious political and social institutions. That is not true only of recent times, when the institutions in question are liberal ones, but of more ancient history as well, when the West benefited from the devolution of power implicit in feudalism and the scope for free thought created by the independence of the medieval Christian church from political control. And that traditional account agreed, with varying degrees of certainty, that those traditions were more or less available to anyone else and would have more or less similar results wherever they were tried. Today Latin American and Asian countries are rocketing toward prosperity (with a bump or two along the way) by mimicking the institutions painfully evolved in England and North America. Curiously, at the very moment when the evidence seems strongest for this insitutional theory, we seem most eager to believe that backward countries are the helpless victims of their pasts.

This reproach is especially pertinent in Diamond's case because his own intentions are so stridently polemical. He wants to scold Westerners for ever having looked down on others and to lift up those others who feel demoralized by the West's superior success. "We keep seeing all those glaring, persistent differences in people's status," he writes. "We're assured that the seemingly transparent biological explanation of the world's inequalities as of AD 1500 is wrong, but we're not told what the correct explanation is. Until we have some convincing, detailed, agreed-upon explanation for the broad pattern of history, most people will continue to suspect that the racist biological explanation is correct after all."

We can all agree that racist arrogance is wrong, both in fact and on principle. But today, racist arrogance is both less prevalent and less dangerous than the opposite danger: a self-pitying refusal to learn from the success of others. History has its victims, of course, and Diamond's account of how those victims became victims is powerful and illuminating. But the best way to deal with one's victimhood is by putting it behind one, rather than lounging upon it and indulging it. History should not be written with the intent to help: it is scholarship, not social work, and its only criterion of success is truth. Still, if it seeks to help, it ought actually to be helpful. And despite its originality and erudition, the lesson that this book seeks to impart is anything but that. ☹